

## *Clowning as Political Commentary: Polynesia, Then and Now*

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Every chief needs a clown. Thus, in Tonga and Samoa, two Polynesian societies marked by hierarchy in the social order, chiefs had in their retinues one or two clowns who were an integral part of their courts. Writing of Samoa in 1884, Turner noted that “court buffoons” amused people at festivals and meetings by their “dress, gait, or gesture, or by lascivious jokes” (126).<sup>1</sup> Gifford’s account of “jesters” who amused Tongan chiefs referred to a man called Kaho from Vava’u who made fun of people and indulged in witty remarks. This same jester, on one hilarious occasion, was carried to a feast tied up like a pig (1929, 126). These clowns amused the chiefs (and their subjects) by providing an alternative view of humanity that was normally suppressed in the interest of group harmony and cohesion. Because of their low position on the social ladder, clowns were more in touch than the chiefs with the common folk and their preferred linguistic code and down-to-earth view of society. They were able to present a populist view (humorous or absurd) that would otherwise be inaccessible to the chiefs. Through the clowns, chiefs were reminded constantly of their subjects and a part of themselves that they had rejected in favor of power and prestige.

Within the larger social context, clowning, rehearsed or improvised, was an avenue through which society inspected itself and commented on its rules and regulations, and the ways in which the imposition of structure and hierarchy constrained and stifled creativity and individual expression. Through role-reversal and inversion of societal norms, an alternative worldview was explored within the frame of play. The message “this is play” masked the seriousness of important messages that were disguised in laughter but nonetheless experienced and felt. Ambiguity

reigned, and individuals who were lampooned through a comic sketch were chastised in a manner that allowed for the saving of face, since humor deflected attention to the entertainment aspect of clowning performances. Like the antics of the "court buffoons" or "jesters" of ancient Tonga or Samoa, these public performances entertained even as they commented on important issues of the day.

In this paper I examine the nature and role of clowning as a critique of chiefly authority and foreigners and foreign influences in Polynesia. From this seemingly narrow vantage point of clowning as political commentary, I then make theoretical comments about clowning in general, drawing attention to its polyphonic nature as a performance genre and its complexity as an object of scholarly analysis. I conclude by returning the reader to my original proposition that clowning was and is an antidote to the abuse of power, and how needed it is in modern Polynesia.

I use the term "clowning" here to refer to public behavior that causes overt signs of mirth or laughter, and the term "clown" as a gloss for jester, fool, or comedian. I begin with a description and discussion of clowning performances in various parts of Polynesia that criticized authority and foreign influences, followed by a brief analysis of clowning theories and how they relate to Polynesian clowning.

Although my focus is on the islands within the boundaries of Hawai'i to the north, Easter Island to the east, New Zealand to the south, and Fiji to the west, clowning as criticism defies boundaries of time or place. Schweder captures the omnipresent and universal need for a clown figure eloquently in the dictum "every court needs a jester, just as it needs a king, and a loyal opposition." Since the thought of absolute power will eventually go to the head of the king, Schweder reasons, and since madness exists in the methods of even the most loyal opposition, it is imperative that the jester not lose his head (1991, 358). Like Schweder, I believe the clown's role to be an important responsibility. However, that responsibility is not limited to the king's court but applies to the chief's retinue and to modern society.

Understandably, chiefs, as a whole, have ambivalent feelings toward free thinkers (such as clowns or writers), who are usually fearless in their commentary. If they would only take note of these commentaries, they would make better leaders: more humane, more honest, and more willing to share power and the material wealth that comes with prestige. Unfortunately, the corruptive nature of power is evident in many high places.

Note, for example, the comments of two of Polynesia's most prominent writers and critics.

Epeli Hau'ofa, a noted Pacific scholar and satirist from Tonga, observed in 1978, some years after independence had been gained in many parts of the Pacific: "It is the privileged who decide on the needs of their communities and the directions of development and whose rising aspirations and affluence entail the worsening conditions of the poor" (11). Fifteen years later, Albert Wendt of Samoa—a perceptive and gifted poet and novelist—reported that corruption is so rife and open in his country today that what he saw in a recent visit made him want to weep (1993a, 113).<sup>2</sup> He extended this observation to the rest of the Pacific: "I have watched the euphoria of independence throughout the Pacific degenerate after ten years into political corruption, and how our people become involved in that. Our new leadership, our new elite—of which I am a member, I am sorry to say—is carrying out a form of colonialism which may even be worse than what we got rid of" (1993b, 59). Like the clowns, writers such as Hau'ofa and Wendt offer criticisms of modern leadership that no wise leader can afford to ignore.

Many contemporary leaders in Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, and Rotuma are also traditional chiefs in their own right, although, as recent political developments in Fiji and Tonga indicate, commoners are threatening to destabilize their power base. Traditional chiefs are tempted to resort to any means necessary to maintain their precarious positions atop a crumbling mountain, so to speak, while commoners chip away, aided by social, economic, and political forces, within and without. Determined to level out the soil and reconfigure the contours of the mountain, these commoners, who are also part of the new educated elite, are becoming increasingly visible in the corridors of government houses.

Modern leadership, unlike the leadership in ancient Polynesia, may be achieved through means other than ancestry. Many of the new educated elite, therefore, are "chiefs" in the modern sense. I therefore include traditional and modern leaders in a broad definition of the word "chiefs," which refers to anyone in a position of influence and therefore susceptible to abuse of power, including foreigners (and their institutions and practices) that are deemed by locals to be in a position of power over them. As evidence in support of my position vis-à-vis clowns and chiefs, I cite examples that range back and forth in time and space, historical descriptions as well as personal observations and academic studies.

## SECULAR AND RITUAL CLOWNING

Clowning traditions of Polynesia have survived to the present, albeit in a much diluted and reconstituted form, in Tonga, Samoa, Rotuma, Fiji, Tokelau, and Hawai'i. Contemporary practices of these indigenous forms still serve the same or similar purposes and employ the same or similar techniques, particularly in rural areas. In the urban centers or cities of the contemporary Pacific, chiefs or their modern counterparts no longer, or rarely, have access to this populist link with the masses. Instead, the role of the clown or jester has been taken over by newspapers, television, and other media. Sometimes chiefs resort to suing the press for real or imagined misrepresentation or try to legislate censorship and thereby curb opposing or different views. A better alternative would be to encourage an indigenous form of critique that has proven effective in the past or to create a modern hybrid suitable for the new order. To facilitate understanding of this indigenous form of critique, I shall discuss clowning under the categories of secular and ritual.

Secular clowning occurs spontaneously, a function of our common humanity. Inspired by the prevailing atmosphere of the social occasion, any individual may entertain the assembled company by clowning. Performing ludicrous antics for only a few seconds or minutes, the secular clown—if one springs up from among the spectators—momentarily releases tension at work parties, weddings, anywhere. This on-the-spot entertainer employs wit, irony, parody, punning, gesturing—any means imaginable—to entertain the assembled company. To limit the occasions when secular clowning can occur or the techniques that may be used is to disregard the spontaneous and fluid nature of secular clowning. In a gathering in which everyone is having a good time, there is no restriction on the number of clowns. Everyone could conceivably become a clown, since the secular clown is self-appointed.

The target of secular clowns may be those in authority, someone in the audience, the values of the dominant class—anyone, anything, or nothing. If the clown is an integral part of a formal dance, then he or she usually acts as a kind of master of ceremonies, calling out instructions, weaving in and out among the dancers, livening things up, and acting as a link with the audience. This role existed in the Rotuman traditional dance called *tautoga* and some Fijian club or spear dances.<sup>3</sup> In the latter case, the clown is called *veli ni meke* 'veli of the dance', with *veli* referring to a rus-



tic gnome living in the bush that supposedly provided the inspiration for the dance. Usually the clown's behavior contrasts starkly with the dignified and orderly arrangement of the dancers. In the Samoan *siva* and the Tongan *tau'olunga*, the male dancers who clown around at the periphery pay their respects to the dancer at the center. Their disorderly behavior enhances the gracefulness and the control of the middle dancer (Shore 1977, 453). This juxtaposition, with the periphery paying respects to the center through clowning antics, is analogous to ritual clowning.

In ritual clowning, the dependent yet opposed positions of the chief and the clown in the social hierarchy is a recurring theme. The community shares an implicit set of understandings, one of which is the gender of the clown. In Rotuma, for example, the ritual clown at traditional weddings is always female, chosen by the relatives of the bride, and past child-bearing age. In Samoa and Fiji, the ritual clown is customarily male. Further, in old Samoa, Tokelau, and Tahiti, the ritual clown was a medium of the spirits; in Fiji and Rotuma, the clown was a representative of the spirits. This link with the supernatural has more or less disappeared, although transvestism is still common, as is the ridiculing of those in authority (particularly chiefs or males) and foreigners or foreign traits. Sometimes the ritual clown deliberately instigates laughter in the midst of serious ritual. This conjunction of the serious and the humorous has various permutations: in Fijian cannibalistic feasting, in Rotuman weddings, and in the comic sketches of Samoa, Tonga, Tokelau, Tahiti, Marquesas, the Cook Islands, and Hawai'i.

The *dramatis personae* of a ritual clown is ambiguous: male and female, human and divine, serious and comic. Although the human body is the primary medium of communication in Polynesia, puppets were employed in Hawai'i and New Zealand; a type of puppet combining strings and rods existed in Mangaia and possibly Easter Island (Luomala 1973, 28-46).<sup>4</sup> The playful context in which the clowns or puppets perform, and the costumes of motley and assorted objects they wear or carry, marginalize the clowns from mainstream society, distance their criticism, and make their biting satire palatable. Criticism is therefore usually accepted in good humor.

Studies of Polynesian clowning concur that this form of licensed disrespect reinforces the status quo and the structure of society. However, because of the inversion of the social order, the ridicule and mockery of chiefs or those in positions of authority, as well as the flaunting of conven-

tions, clowning is potentially a creative and progressive force that could upset the foundations on which society is built. Clowns straddle the interface between order and disorder, with a foot in each camp, assembling and disassembling, forever confounding attempts to decode their true intent and the meanings of their communication. Still, it is useful to attempt analysis, with an awareness that the meanings of clowning are multiple and that there is no single interpretation that is definitive.

### CRITICISM OF CHIEFS, MEN, AND AUTHORITY

Ritual clowns are often from the lowest stratum of society: in Samoa, the lead comedians in a *fale aitu* 'house of the spirit' sketch are usually young untitled men; in Rotuma, the *hàn mane'āk su* 'woman who plays the wedding' is always someone of low rank who is past child-bearing age; in Tahiti, only the lower grades indulged in the so-called obscene practices of the *arioi* 'religious society of comedians' (Webster 1968, 164-167). In customary contexts of "privileged license," these "common" folk lampooned the manners of their chiefs and others who ruled over them. This practice is less prevalent today; ritual clowns tend to be fearful of the chiefs and reluctant to play their role to the hilt. My study of the Rotuman ritual clown and records of past practices in different parts of Polynesia provides evidence of this change (Hereniko forthcoming).

Rotuman clowning at weddings (or mat-weaving rituals of old) is improvised and therefore fragmented. I have written extensively about Rotuman clowning elsewhere (Hereniko 1992*b*, forthcoming), and will simply reiterate here that the female ritual clown parodies the behavior of male chiefs. She prances around wielding a stick and orders people, particularly the chiefs and the men, to do her bidding: she forces them to dance in the sun, kneel on the ground, sit down, stand up, or do whatever she fancies. Having temporarily relinquished his powers to the ritual clown, the district chief, whom the clown would normally obey, becomes a target for the clown's antisocial behavior. Through ridicule and parody, the district chief and other dignitaries experience being "common" and being ordered around. Although at the end of the wedding chiefs resume their privileged status, while the clown returns to being an ordinary housewife, this role-reversal, theoretically, provides an opportunity for chiefs to learn humility. Wise chiefs take note of the messages communicated through clowning.

Several accounts of Tahitian clowning also suggest that those in positions of authority were ridiculed in comedic performances. Unlike ritual clowning in Rotuma, Tahitian clowning by the *arioi* society occurred in the context of a comic sketch driven by a plot. Young men and women members of the *arioi* traveled from island to island performing dances and comic sketches. In 1774 Captain Cook saw more than sixty canoes of *arioi* performers as they were leaving Huahine to visit neighboring islands (Angas 1866, 297; Andersen 1969, 437). Prior to their departure, pig sacrifices and large quantities of fruits were given to the God 'Oro (Angas 1866, 296–297). Oliver, whose descriptions on the *arioi* in the context of Tahitian society are among the most informative, lists twelve different descriptions for the *arioi*, ranging from “a society of comedians” to “human harpies . . . in whose character and habits all that is most loathsome—earthly, sensual, devilish—was combined” (1974, 913–914).

Amusements of the *arioi* were generally held at night, with fires and candlenut tapers providing illumination. Sometimes performances were held in the open air or on canoes as they approached the shore, but more frequently they occurred under the cover of houses erected for public entertainment.<sup>5</sup> High stools and seats for the chief *arioi* of both sexes were positioned on a high platform erected at one end while the comedians performed at the center of the building, presided over by the *arioi-hi'o-niao* ‘master of ceremonies’. According to Henry, “the actors flattered or ridiculed with impunity people and even priests, from the greatest to the least, and they often did much good in causing faults to be corrected” (1928, 237–241). Andersen lends support by describing the *arioi* as similar to European medieval minstrels and the actors in the mystery and morality plays; he adds that in their dramatic performances, priests and others were “fearlessly ridiculed” (1969, 437–438).

According to Angas and Webster, a kindred society of the *arioi* existed in the Marquesas, the Caroline Islands, New Zealand, Mangareva, Tuamotu, the Ladrone (Marianas) Islands, the Cook Islands (Rarotonga) and Hawai'i (Angas 1866, 296; Webster 1968, 164–170).<sup>6</sup>

Like the Tahitians, Samoans performed plotted sketches when they traveled from one village to another during excursions they call *malaga*. Sloan recorded in 1941 the presence of an acting group in each village in Samoa and an ability to “put on any one of a hundred different plays with only a few days' notice” (110). Like the *commedia dell'arte* that originated in Italy and was popular from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries in

Europe (Caputi 1978), and the anti-establishment clowning in Rotuma and Tahiti, Samoan troupes of *fale aitu* actors were a constant source of amusement and a popular way of commenting on society's affairs. It occurred within the frame of a *poula* 'teasing night' held during a *malaga*, in which there was oratory, dancing, singing, and *fale aitu* sketches.<sup>7</sup>

The *poula* began at dusk with the gathering of old people to sing and dance for each other.<sup>8</sup> After dark, when the old people had left, the young men and women entered and sat at opposite ends of the *fale aitu* 'house of the spirits.' The singing and dancing began slowly, building up tempo as the young people became increasingly ribald and erotic, culminating in a wild sexual frenzy. At this point, someone would shout, "I see the ghost, he is coming!" and everyone would rush into the darkness to indulge in sexual intercourse. After the sexual act, the young men and women returned to the *fale aitu* for the performance of comic sketches (Kneubuhl 1993). At the center of these comic sketches that Shore calls a "Samoan vision, albeit a comic vision, of social disorder" (1977, 333) is the lead comedian, who is male but adopts the ambiguous persona of a ghost and is often referred to as *aitu* (318). According to Victoria Kneubuhl, *aitu* are associated with chaos, wilderness, danger, and darkness (1987, 167). Since the lead comedian is a transvestite assuming the persona of a ghost, these dual roles reinforce the marginal position of the comedian on stage, distance him—the roles serve the same function as masks—and free him from taking responsibility for what happens within the comic frame (Shore 1977, 333).

Rather than maintaining the illusion of being an *aitu*, the lead comedian continually breaks out of role to remind the audience of his real identity (Shore 1977, 333). Is he a ghost masked as transvestite, or is he just a man? Is it Petelo the infallible ghost speaking, or is it the fallible man? (365). This constant shifting in and out of character leads Shore to assert that "comic virtuosity makes the clown at once admirable, dangerous, and funny" (334). The clown's ambiguous persona and the sanctioned frame allow him to criticize and to be able to get away with it.<sup>9</sup>

Commentators on the *fale aitu* attribute the following functions to this social institution. Victoria Kneubuhl views *fale aitu* as important for the release of tension through laughter and for relief from the constraints of a regimented daily routine (1987, 166–167); Shore highlights the value of the *aitu* in dealing with "certain kinds of conflict where direct confrontation is culturally impossible or problematical" (1978, 178). Possible conflict in

relations of complementarity that overtly deny the possibility of conflict—such as that between chiefs and their subjects or between the sexes—are dealt with covertly in the safe arena of the comic sketch (197–198). Sinavaiana's work focuses primarily on contemporary practice in Western Samoa, and though she concurs with the views of Kneubuhl and Shore, she notes that in recent years a lead comedian was fined for being too skillful at the art of comedy. According to an informant, "the village pastor was being lampooned so skillfully and accurately that the pastor himself laughed hard enough to fall from his chair in the audience . . . and later the comedian was fined" (Sinavaiana 1992c, 214). The imposition of a fine on a comedian whose role was customarily sanctioned by the spirits is significant. It reflects changes in the way a traditional institution is viewed today.

A brief foray into the early Fijian material reveals practices, no longer followed now, that are instructive about the role of Fijian clowns, which Clunie and Ligairi prefer to call "masquers" because of their link with the supernatural (1983). In Fiji, the most eagerly anticipated event of the pre-Christian social calendar was the "invoking of *tabu* harvesting embargoes and . . . the *i sevu* harvest festival" (Clunie and Ligairi 1983, 57). At such festivals, first fruits (*i sevu*) were offered to the gods and to the chiefs, the gods' representatives on earth. The yam harvest was regarded as the most important crop, and when yams grew abundantly, their harvest signaled a season of plenty. During the months building up to the yam or crop harvest, certain prohibitions were placed on crops, fish, and other livestock. Dances were rehearsed and artifacts produced in preparation for exchanges between the hosts and the visitors. There was great anticipation as people looked forward to the performances of the masquers, who "on this day could mock earthly authority with a licence normally undreamt of" (Clunie and Ligairi 1983, 57). An 1840s account of a first-fruits presentation involving the Roko Tui Dreketi, high chief of Rewa, recorded a masquer dressed as a sailor, who, upon being reminded that he was in the presence of Tui Dreketi,

immediately asked who Tui Dreketi was, and could not be made to understand, till some of them looked in the direction the king was sitting, when he pointed (which is greatly against the rules), and asked if that was the "old bloke," walking up to him bolt upright and offering his hand, which the king smilingly shook. The sailor then told him he had better take a whiff or two with him, as it was the best tobacco he had smoked for many a day. The king,

willing to make the best of the amusement, took the pipe, the spectators making the air ring again with their shouts of laughter.<sup>10</sup>

As in the ritual clowning of Rotuma, Samoa, and Tahiti, the Fijian clown or masquer had license to ridicule chiefs and leading dancers. This symbolic inversion of hierarchy allowed the clown's superior to display a side of his character otherwise hidden from the general public. Here, the chief's elevated position is collapsed as clown and chief meet as actors in a play who can appreciate and celebrate their shared humanity, of which humor is an integral part.

Clowning also occurred in cannibalistic feasting. Writing in 1884, Britton described twenty bodies at a cannibal feast being subjected to all kinds of indignities, then presented at the temple and accepted by the priests as a peace offering to God. The faces of the dead bodies were painted with vermilion and soot to give them a lifelike appearance.

Next a herald advanced in presence of the multitude, and touching each ghastly corpse in turn in a friendly way, the proudest silence being preserved by the spectators, harangued it in a jocular manner, expressing his extreme regret at seeing such a fine fellow in so sorry a plight, asking if he did not feel ashamed of himself after his recent loud boasting from behind the fortress, and wondering why he should have ventured so far down the hill, unless it was to see his dear friends of Ramaka. Finally the herald expressed them in more excited strains, and wound up by knocking the bodies down like so many ninepins, amid shouts of laughter from the bystanders. (Britton 1884, 144)

The bodies were then dragged away to be dissected and consumed. According to Britton, revelry and mirth were very much part of human feasts of this nature, particularly when strong opposing chiefs were captured. Not even death could prevent the Fijian custom of mocking chiefs in the cause of laughter.

Clowning has a leveling effect. Through mocking laughter, imbalances in the power structure can be restored. This example from Adrian Tanner, an anthropologist who did field research in the villages of Savatu in Central Viti Levu in 1986 (in Nagatagata particularly), provided further evidence in support of this observation. According to him, the context was a gift-giving ritual held at the husband's village years after a couple had been married; in this case the couple had had at least three children. As the "bride" walked across a mat, with her classificatory brothers and uncles

following behind her, the women of the “groom’s” *mataqali* ‘tribe’ mock-attacked the men, who accepted this “ambush” in good humor (Adrian Tanner, pers comm, Kaua‘i, 1990).

Tanner observed other women clowning later in the day. He reported that two women dressed in men’s overalls had appeared riding hobby horses and had displayed mock hostility toward the men who were drinking *yaqona* ‘kava’. Their appearance was sudden, and they paraded in front of the men, goading them to react. In addition, he described an all-female *yaqona* ceremony that was attended by his wife. The women drank *yaqona* and performed some “lewd” dancing among themselves. At the very end of the festivities, an elderly woman from the bride’s side was seen chasing an old man from the groom’s side across the village green, as though to rape him. She then indulged in sexual gesturing, to the amusement of the crowd.

The occasions described above are inverse manifestations of gender and intervillage relations. According to Tanner, these villagers were probably enemies in the past who had become friends; mock aggression or criticism within this context allowed old enemies to express hostility without threatening their current friendship. Women, who were usually regarded as inferior to men, were able to act out their antagonistic feelings toward men by dressing up and behaving stupidly. Men and women have to live together, and women cannot overthrow the men. What they can do is to challenge men symbolically. Also, as the bride’s side received more than was given away, her classificatory brothers “paid” for this imbalance by tolerating mock antagonism from the women of the husband’s side. Reciprocity is an important feature of Fijian life, although it is possible to be too generous and to appear too pushy. Such mock attacks restored the balance.

A social control function is also apparent in the Hawaiian *hula ki‘i*, in which ancient Hawaiians used puppets dressed up to represent human beings. The puppets, which were about one-third life-size, were held by a performer (or performers) who stood behind a screen.<sup>11</sup> The performer manipulated the movements of a puppet from under its clothing while at the same time reciting the words that were apparently being uttered by the puppet. Sometimes human dancers imitated the puppets (Luomala 1984, 5). Emerson claimed that interest in performances of this type of hula was stimulated by byplay and buffoonery.



One of the marionettes, for instance, points to some one in the audience; whereupon one of the *hoopaa* [members of the hula company who are instrumentalists sitting still] asks, "What do you want?" The marionette persists in his pointing. At length the interlocutor, as if divining the marionette's wish, says: "Ah, you want So-and-so." At this the marionette nods assent, and the *hoopaa* asks again, "Do you wish him to come to you?" The marionette expresses its delight and approval by nods and gestures, to the immense satisfaction of the audience, who join in derisive laughter at the expense of the person held up to ridicule. (1965, 93)

The songs of the *hula ki'i*, he writes, "may be characterized as gossipy, sarcastic, ironical, scandal-mongering, dealing in satire, abuse, hitting right and left at social personal vices—a cheese of rank flavour that is not to be partaken of too freely." The genre "might be compared to the vaudeville in opera or to the genre picture in art" (94).

It is not clear if royalty were also ridiculed in such performances; however, it is conceivable that out-of-favor *ali'i* were sometimes targets for ridicule. Luomala lent support: "By means of humor and insouciance the composers of *hula ki'i* meles [*sic*] and skits violated everyday restraints on speech and behaviour and delighted in vicarious defiance of them. After all, the puppets were only wooden figures behaving outrageously, and not real people" (1984, 71).

She adds that the illusion that the puppets were real human beings was maintained sometimes by the puppeteers, by speaking directly with the spectators (1984, 98). The puppets generally provided a distancing effect by becoming social intermediaries and commentators; their barbs of ridicule and criticism were therefore tolerable. The separation between audience and actors preserved the mysterious aloofness. A member of the audience who was lured onto the stage usually ended up looking ridiculous in a setting in which to behave and look normal was to be out of place.<sup>12</sup> As in the *fale aitu* sketches, a certain amount of improvisation ensured that the acting and dialogue were relevant and dynamic.

## CRITICISM OF FOREIGNERS AND FOREIGN INFLUENCES

Colonial government brought with it foreign men and institutions that soon became as powerful, if not as oppressive, as the indigenous institution of chieftainship. Subsequently, clowning became a form of anticolonial or counterhegemonic commentary. That which was foreign became

the theme of numerous comic sketches. Using mimicry, parody, or satire, Polynesians, like colonized people elsewhere, satirized foreigners or foreign institutions and practices in order to demystify or resist them. Jersey, writing in 1893, gave an account of such a performance: "Two or three of them [clowns] jumped up and began to act with immense spirit, great contortion of face, and an enjoyment so keen that it could not fail to communicate itself to onlookers. One series of gesticulations was supposed to represent 'German fashion'; the imitation of walk and countenance was hardly complimentary to the supporters of the late Tamasese" (257). Writing in 1941, Sloan recorded a parody of his own behavior:

I was ill prepared to see a huge hulk of a man come prancing out into the center of the room, wearing my best white suit, my sun helmet and a pair of tennis shoes—on the wrong feet—all of which he had borrowed from my trunk unknown to me. His face was smeared with white lime, and he was grinning from ear to ear as in mock majesty he strutted out before us, trailing a long heavy rope over his shoulder. Reaching the center of the room, he turned and began to pull and tug on the rope as if it were anchored to a tree. At last he dragged into view a small, protesting boy who had the other end of the rope tied round his neck. Cradled in the boy's arms was a huge basket which the clown took from him and tore open. After peering intently inside for a moment he gave a joyful shout and pulled from it a black box which had been cleverly fixed up to look like my camera.

With great ado he pushed and twisted at imaginary knobs and gadgets on it to satisfy himself that it was ready for the first shot. He then tripped daintily to where I sat and contorted himself into every position imaginable, getting from the crowd a twitter of ill-concealed giggles, before he pressed the trigger of a big bamboo clapper, flattened on one side that was supposed to be the shutter release. It went off with a bang like a firework, and the clown fell down backwards as if he had been bowled over by the kick of a double-barreled shotgun. The crowd roared with laughter, and I joined in too, laughing till my sides ached. (78)

In August of 1992 I witnessed a sketch in which masculine Samoan men dressed in ridiculous modern female attire (complete with lipstick and high heels) vied for first place in a beauty pageant. As they trippingly entered the stage and parodied femininity in front of a mixed audience, the crowd screamed with delight and surprise, if not shock. This comic sketch was an imitation of males imitating females, a phenomenon that the actors associated with modern development, as evidenced by their

choice of attire, their use of the English language, and the female stars (such as Whitney Houston) that they parodied. When the master of ceremonies asked the lead comedian to make a any final comment, the reply was "The University of the South Pacific is full of poofsters!"<sup>13</sup>

What is one to make of this comic sketch? On first impression, these brave and masculine men seemed to be satirizing modernization and its concomitant institutions of homosexuality, cross-dressing, and pop culture. As each male appeared in drag that displayed individual imagination and attention, he/she portrayed a parodic view of the *fa'afafine* 'the way of women' that was ridiculous, shameful, and therefore negative. Like the Tahitian *mahu* (the equivalent of the Samoan *fa'afafine*) (Levy 1971, 16–20; 1973, 472–473), these negative images reminded men in the audience of how they were not supposed to behave or dress (Mageo 1992, 443–459). Also implied was a rejection of homosexuality or transvestism in favor of the indigenous view of the ideal Samoan male.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike in Samoa, where the *fale aitu* is a male domain, in Tokelau the women play a role equal to men. The contexts, however, are similar, and villagewide events such as weddings, feasts, and cricket matches are the preferred occasions. The skits usually involve two characters playing out mock family quarrels. A classic performance is a domestic dispute between husband and wife; Tokelauans find this performance hilarious because the male and female characters are brother and sister or similarly related.<sup>15</sup>

During the performance of a comic sketch described by Huntsman and Hooper, the women who are mothers and wives in middle age or older wear "European shirts, ties, coats, trousers and shoes, garments crumpled and filthy, trouser flies gaping open and shoes odd and ill-fitting" (415), as they reenact scenes from blackbirding days or parody a medical scene—using a "stethoscope" made from a piece of rope and checking out each other's orifices and exclaiming in amazement, envy, or disgust. Women also act as mediators between quarreling men by clowning to diffuse tension (428).<sup>16</sup> These accounts suggest that Tokelauan women use clowning as a form of protest for matters involving gender roles and relations. Also, as in other parts of Polynesia, the white man and his "strange" practices are a recurring theme of local humor.

From Fiji comes an example that is reminiscent of the sketch above as well as the earlier account of the Samoan clown's parody of Sloan and his

camera. In the early 1940s the Muanivatu people presented their first fruits (yams) to their paramount chief, the Tui Wailevu of an independent kingdom of southern Vanua Levu. As the villagers approached the chief's house and stood in file,

five pairs of strong men suddenly ran onto the *rara* dragging by their midribs five *waqanidriai* 'canoes' made of *niusawa* fronds. Perched precariously back to back in each vessel, jolting and bouncing as they came, were two *driainisevu* maskers. Halting before the mounds of first fruit offerings, the burly canoe haulers seized their frantically struggling passengers, and carried them one by one, each squirming and peddling his legs furiously in the air, to stand in line before a grotesque trio of *turanai-driai*, officious and vociferous parodies of bossy European overseers, each wearing a khaki shirt over an amply padded paunch, and copping about on stumpy . . . stilts made from half coconut shells tied to long cords which passed between the big and second toes of their wearers, to be held in their hands. (Clunie and Ligairi 1983, 64-65)

The unflattering view of Europeans portrayed above is comparable to a more recent account of Fijian women satirizing Indo-Fijian women by dressing in white bed sheets, plastering their faces with flour, and carrying buckets and pots on their heads (Arno 1922, 44). As these "Indian" women danced a Fijian *meke* 'dance', their faces wore exaggerated fixed grins, reinforcing the stereotypical view of Indians as overly serious and surly.

More satires of foreigners (from the indigenous peoples' perspective) appear in these accounts from Hawai'i. Emerson writes that Hawaiians used the *oli* 'chants' "not only for the songful expression of joy and affection, but as the vehicle of humorous or sarcastic narrative in the entertainment of their comrades" (1965, 254). The *oli* was a favorite form of amusement, even for Hawaiians who ended up as sailors.

I have heard Mr. Manini, who was the most noted *improvisatore* among them, sing for an hour together, when at work in the midst of Americans and Englishmen; and, by the occasional shouts and laughter of the Kanaks, who were at a distance, it was evident that he was singing about the different men that he was at work with. They have great powers of ridicule, and more excellent mimics, many of them discovering and imitating the peculiarities of our own people before we had observed them ourselves. (Dana 1959, 117)

Emerson also suggests that the example above is not uncommon. "If a traveller, not knowing the language of the country, noticed his Hawaiian guide and baggage-carriers indulging in mirth while listening to an *oli* by

one of their number, he would probably be right in suspecting himself to be the innocent butt of their merriment" (1965, 254).

These accounts of Polynesians satirizing foreigners to their islands, foreign institutions, or foreign behavior reveal a subversive function of clowning, with the clown figure standing at center stage, embroiled in an ongoing commentary on important issues of the day.

### SOME THEORETICAL COMMENTS

Clowning communicates many messages simultaneously. Thus far, I have singled out its political role and thereby have run the risk of reducing this complex phenomenon to limited functions, a charge that was often hurled at early studies of clowning in other parts of the world. I wish now to open up the discussion to broader issues and parallels, and to highlight and draw attention to several different interpretations by different scholars, and other messages of import that clowns and clowning communicate in their performances.

My own study of the Rotuman *hān mane'āk su* (Hereniko 1990), Sinaivaiana's dissertation on the Samoan *fale aitu* (1992b), and Clunie and Ligairi's (1983) reading of Fijian spirit masquers indicate that in these three societies the ritual clown also mediated between the world of the living and that of the dead. Ethnographic accounts of the *arioi* society of Tahiti also reveal the same link with the spirit world of dead ancestors. This important function of clowning is only hinted at (in terms such as *fale aitu* 'house of the spirits') in this article.

Clowning performances share similarities with carnival, which Bakhtin describes as a "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order" and an avenue of "becoming, change, and renewal" (1968, 109). For Bakhtin, carnival is a festive critique of the dominant class and its values. In a world that is temporarily turned upside down, the material body (what Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism") accompanied by carnivalesque laughter becomes the central image for topsy-turvy play that flaunts convention and the constraints of rules and regulations. In this context that is akin to comic theater, a multitude of human voices engage in a dialogue that regenerates and revitalizes society (Bakhtin 1968).

Both clowning and carnival come under the wider rubric of symbolic inversion—what Stallybrass and White (1986) call transgression, defined by Babcock as "any act of expressive behavior which inverts, contradicts,

abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious, social and political" (1978, 14). Using this wide-angle lens to view clowning reveals similarities with Pacific literature, particularly the fiction of Epeli Hau'ofa in his novel *Kisses in the Nederends* (1987a), where the primary image is the anus and the narrative is about the search for a cure to an ailment in this part of the body that is taboo in normal speech or writing. Hau'ofa's apparent disrespect for the language of propriety and decorum and his focus on the earthy humor of ordinary Pacific Islanders at the bar or marketplace has led Subramani to say that this comic satirist has liberated Pacific literature from a "narrow-minded seriousness that typifies the early literature" (1988, 50). However, it remains to be seen whether other Pacific writers will follow in Hau'ofa's footsteps. The complaints of some of my previous students at the University of the South Pacific about Wendt's use of four-letter words and his graphic descriptions of lovemaking in his early novels (1973, 1977, 1979) suggest that transgression in fiction does not necessarily liberate, as Subramani and Bakhtin would have us believe. Rather, transgression could conceivably reinforce the moral and spiritual superiority of the reader, as Stallybrass and White have suggested in *The Poetics and Politics of Transgression*. Likewise, Kristeva's proposition that the breaking of formal literary codes of language challenges official law (1980, 65) implies that Hau'ofa's focus on obscenity in *Kisses* challenges elitist discourse. I am more inclined, however, to agree with Stallybrass and White who suggest that political change is possible only when there is control of the major *sites* of discourse. Challenges within a particular site of discourse—in this case fiction—do not threaten the hierarchy of sites of discourse, and therefore their potential for effecting change may exist only in the political unconscious with no visible shift or realignment in the domain of discourse (1986, 201–202).

My writing on Rotuman clowning (Hereniko 1990) and Sinavaiana's dissertation (1992b) claim that since clowning performances are licensed affairs, they ultimately reinforce the norm. Studies of the Samoan *fale aitu* by Shore (1977, 1978, 1991) and Victoria Kneubuhl (1987) as well as Huntsman and Hooper's (1975) analysis of Tokelauan clowning also support this theory. Earlier commentators such as Eagleton (1981), Gluckman (1965), Eco (1984), and Nelson (1990) also concur that clowning serves the interests of the dominant culture that it apparently opposes.

But clowning in Rotuma or Samoa is also potentially destabilizing and has been known to bring about changes, albeit small, in the way people relate or do not relate to each other at the end of the day, for example. Writing about the role of *fale aitu* in general, Sinavaiana claims it will be important as Samoa “navigates the rickety bridge ‘betwixt and between’ cultural epochs [of] ancient Polynesia and the modern world” (1992*b*, 331). The potential for clowning performances to influence contemporary social and political change is a challenge that I hope will soon be realized fully.

Victor Turner (1982) and now Mitchell (1992*a*, 1992*b*), (among others) see the preoccupation with whether clowning is conservative or progressive meaningless outside the realm of specific case studies. Stallybrass and White concur, offering a view that best sums up this controversy. Rejecting the issue of whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, they assert that “for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but that, given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as *catalyst* and *site of actual and symbolic struggle*” (1986, 14; emphasis in original).

The accounts in the early literature of Rotuma, Tahiti, and Samoa indicate that ritual clowning in these societies was much more grotesque, in Bakhtinian terms than it is today. It was also performed to the “collective ancestral body of all the people” (Bakhtin 1968, 19). Carnival, like the *fale aitu* of Samoa or the ritual clowning at weddings in Rotuma, was a locus for recreation and re-creation of seemingly contradictory and opposed elements that encapsulated the complexity of human society. History reveals no revolutions caused by clowning performances in Polynesia. If anything, the evidence indicates that war was forbidden during *arioi* performances, but resumed as soon as these comedic performances ended. Tokelauan women also clowned to diffuse tension between quarreling men, and it is probable that humor and laughter in other parts of Polynesia did a lot to maintain harmony between opposing parties. In this sense, clowning was a conservative force.

In the present climate of “sharpened political antagonism,” social institutions such as the *fale aitu* or *arioi* can act as a “catalyst and site” of actual and political struggle. They can become a mouthpiece for the oppressed in society as well as an arena for the exploration of important issues of the day. Through comedy sketches—parallel to political cartoons



in Western discourse—chiefs and those in positions of authority can be kept in touch with their subjects and the issues that disturb them. Chiefs can also learn to laugh again and not to take themselves too seriously.

A group of Pacific Islanders attending a university in Marawa were celebrating a friend's birthday.<sup>17</sup> Students from five or so different islands from various parts of the Pacific as well as a number from the US mainland, a total of about twenty people, attended. A Fijian woman and her American husband arrived at a late stage during the party with a *tanoa* 'bowl' of *yaqona*, and the husband proceeded to mix this drink.<sup>18</sup> The atmosphere was informal, with everyone sitting on chairs, drinking beer, laughing, and telling stories. When the *yaqona* was ready, the Fijian woman told the assembled company that it would be drunk informally—that is, without protocol. This seemed appropriate, given the context. But unknown to all but one, a chief (who was also a professor) was present. Apparently offended that proper respect to his status was not observed, the chief/professor removed his shirt to reveal his tattoo, got off his chair to sit down on the floor, and refused to drink second because it was demeaning to his position (this he told us in his speech). Then he stood up and gave everyone an earful of "authentic" Pacific custom and complained that he should have been accorded proper respect befitting his title and status.<sup>19</sup> His exhortation was for Pacific Islanders in the room to adhere to tradition. Since no one else in the room was from this individual's country, this "sermon" was most strange. Suffice it to say that the evening was ruined. A lesson in humility, through Rotuman clowning perhaps, would benefit this chief and other status-conscious individuals who impose their assumed authority on other people, irrespective of the context or the multicultural nature of the assembled company. Hau'ofa's observation that "the privileged often try to force other certain traditions on the poor [those they regard to be of inferior social status] in order . . . to secure the privileges that they have gained, not so much from their involvement in traditional activities, as from the privileged access to resources in the regional economy" (1987b, 12) appears most perceptive.

## CONCLUSION

As performance, clowning in Polynesia communicates through body language, verbal utterances, costume, use of space, color, and stage properties. The tropes of irony, parody, caricature and exaggeration are also

handy techniques that clowns use to humorous effect. Clowning performances may be secular or sacred. Secular clowning is usually spontaneous, whereas sacred (or ritual) clowning is programmed by society and obligatory. The former is ubiquitous, a function of humanity; the latter originated in sacred rituals associated with ancestral religions. Whether secular or ritual, clowning provides avenues for the expression of dissent as well as alternative ways of being. It is therefore important in the mediation of conflict and the maintenance (or creation) of a humane leadership, particularly in modern Polynesia, where many chiefs are losing their sense of humor as they seek (by hook or by crook) to hang on to power and the perks that come with status (Wendt 1977, 1993a, 1993b; Howard 1986, 1993; Lal 1992). The techniques and functions of secular and ritual clowning are similar, particularly in contemporary practice, where the sacred element in ritual clowning has been eradicated by Christianity and colonization, and a marked shift toward secular performance is evident.<sup>20</sup>

Christianity and colonialism destroyed the contexts that allowed ritual clowning to survive or to be effective. For instance, the *poula* nights of ancient Samoa and the *arioi* of Tahiti were regarded by missionaries and their converts as evidence of the devil at work. Their efforts, aided by Western education and Western notions of proper conduct, resulted in the eradication of the *arioi* sometime in the first half of the nineteenth century (Ellis 1834, 169) and the *poula* by the 1950s.<sup>21</sup> Since ancestral religion was at the core on these institutions, the missionaries forbade their practice; subsequently, they coopted these theatrical traditions into acceptable vehicles to serve their own purposes or that of secular society.

With decolonization and independence in Samoa in 1960, issues of self-determination resurfaced. A growing confidence has resulted in the revival of some of the old institutions, albeit in a more sanitized and acceptable form for Christian converts. For example, the comic sketches of Samoa are now performed in schools and viewed on television. Once a part of boating expeditions between villages, the *fale aitu* is now an institution in its own right. Many American Samoans experience these sketches vicariously through television; Western Samoans perform *fale aitu* as part of the annual comedy competition during Independence Day festivities; immigrant Samoans in the United States and New Zealand sometimes use *fale aitu* as a means of earning much-needed cash. In Tahiti, modern dramatic performances draw from the historical records of *arioi* performances (for costuming and staging), although the religious practices of this once

vibrant and dynamic institution have been either forgotten or suppressed. Biblical pageants in the Cook Islands, Samoa, and Tonga are now big events. As for Rotuma, the ritual clown's link with the supernatural has been lost, and the *hàn mane'āk su*'s demise is imminent.

In Fiji, first-fruit festivals are now largely a thing of the past, as are the colorful performances of the masquers. The seasonal yam crop has now been replaced by cassava or the ubiquitous white bread. Church disapproval, the tendency to plant cash crops, the subsequent decline in the subsistence surplus, and the growing reluctance of chiefs to reciprocate properly have also contributed to the decline of these performances (Clunie and Ligairi 1983, 70–71). Even the *veli ni meke* that used to be an integral part of club dances in certain parts of Fiji is rarely seen; in modern eyes, it seems out of place in formal performances directed at royalty or chiefs. The likelihood of a revival of the first-fruit festivals and associated performances of the “spiritual guardians of fertility” (Clunie and Ligairi 1983, 71) is slim indeed as Fiji, like its neighbors, aspires to emulate the ways of the modern world.

Yet chiefs remain. Recent events and political developments in Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa indicate that many chiefs are now out of touch with the common folk. Ensconced in constitutional politics, living in towns or cities, engaged in the pursuit of power and money, many chiefs (both traditional and modern) could benefit by employing a clown or jester as part of their households. In the evenings, villagers could arrive with a comic sketch in which they could play out their frustrations and needs, and perhaps, occasionally, parody the oppressive face of authority.

Though ritual clowning has lost its link with ancestral spirits in most of Polynesia, its evolution into a more secular form need not be seen as a loss in potency. Rather, its convergence with secular clowning, albeit in various permutations performed in a myriad of settings, could bring about the conscious use of this form as a site for political commentary. The benefits? The restoration of a sense of humor, an awareness of the wishes of the oppressed, and possibly a more humane approach to power and prestige.

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## Notes

1 See also Stair (1897, 122), who describes a "jester" or "court fool" or "quick flyer." On page 123, he mentions "freelance" clowns who wandered freely and attached themselves to chiefs.

2 Also read Wendt (1979) for a treatment of the same theme in fiction.

3 This role in the *tautoga* was described to me by Rotuma's historian Vafo'ou Jiare; see also Hereniko (1977) for a detailed description of this dance. For Fijian dances, see Clunie and Ligairi (1983, 55). I also saw this role enacted in a spear dance performed by Queen Victoria School students at the National Gymnasium in 1989.

4 Luomala concludes that the movable images were strung and worn as necklaces in secular and religious processions and dances as well as carried in the dancers' hands or arms.

5 See Muggridge, cited in Oliver (1974, 920). For another description, see Forster (1777, 398-399).

6 Webster writes that the version of *arioi* in the Marianas was called the *uritoi*.

7 The *fale aitu* is also comparable to popular theater or theater for community development. It is a form that is popular in many third-world countries and now has counterparts in Vanuatu and the Solomon Islands. The use of this indigenous form to disseminate developmental and educational information is a possibility that is yet to be widely realized in Polynesia.

8 For early reports, see Pritchard (1866, 78); Williams (1984 [1830-1832], 247-248).

9 Ambiguity (sometimes through the use of symbols) is often employed by artists in order to avoid the wrath of the establishment. For an example of the way theater was used to comment on the Fiji coup of 1987 and Fijian-Indian relations, see Hereniko (1992a). See also Nero (1992).

10 Jackson (William Diaper), cited in Clunie and Ligairi 1983, 60.

11 Luomala (1984) identifies seven kinds of *hula ki'i*, one of which does not use a screen or wooden puppets.

12 Usually the best defense was to be just as ridiculous as the puppets; it was also possible for the "victim" to turn the tables on the actors.

13 A videotaped copy of this performance may be acquired by writing to the Director, Media Center, University of the South Pacific, PO Box 1168, Suva, Fiji.

14 For an overview of homosexuality, transvestism, and issues related to sexual orientation in Polynesia, see Besnier 1994.

15 All the information on Tokelauan clowning is from Huntsman and Hooper 1975.

16 For an earlier example (1840s), see Cannibal Jack Jackson (William Diaper), cited in Clunie and Ligairi (1983, 60).

17 Marawa is a fictional island that was created for the play *Last Virgin in Paradise* (Hereniko and Teaiwa 1993). I use it here to give this incident some anonymity.

18 During his speech the chief claimed that since this man was a haole, he should not have presumed he could mix the *yaqona*. He added that this haole could have been killed had he made the same mistake in the chief's country.

19 After this long first speech, he disappeared. We thought he had gone home, and an argument developed among us as we blamed each other for having offended the chief. But the chief returned about thirty minutes later with a large quantity of liquor. After depositing the evidence of his wealth, he gave us another long speech about "authentic" Pacific custom, which was really his own version of his country's custom.

20 See Mitchell (1992) for the most comprehensive and up-to-date review of clowning worldwide. The volume also contains essays on clowning in specific Oceanic societies: Wape, Murik, North Mekeo, and Lusi Kaliai, in Papua New Guinea, as well as Samoa and Rotuma.

21 See Mageo (1992, 449), who writes that an informant reported spying on *poula* in his boyhood in the 1950s.

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### Abstract

Improvised or rehearsed clowning, in ritual and secular contexts, is an important avenue for the criticism of the power structure and those who ignore the norms of society in Polynesia. The humorous nature of criticism as well as the distancing effect of theater create a context in which those being criticized rarely take offense. In the 1990s, however, the nature and the role of this traditional institu-

tion has changed dramatically, owing largely to the influence of introduced religions and colonialism. The disappearance of this traditional outlet in many islands in contemporary Polynesia means the loss of a safety valve for the release of tension and for healthy criticism that contributes to the improvement of the quality of life. This article examines a traditional institution that has been overlooked by scholars until recent years and argues for the importance of avenues—traditional or modern—through which the oppressed in society can channel their grievances and needs in a nonthreatening and creative manner to those who wield power over them.